

Addressing Suicide Among Veterans

One of the big concerns regarding pastoral care for military veterans is their high suicide rate. Suicide is a risk factor for anyone who suffers from clinical depression or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), both sadly common among military veterans. Observers, however, note that there are additional complicating factors with veterans.

War veterans in particular have experienced the taking of life, if only as an observer. Experiences vary greatly, but a number of veterans report feeling immersed in death during their war-time service. One veteran, reflecting on her first years after her Gulf War service, remembers that at that time she saw no reason for people not to kill themselves if they wanted to.

Another risk factor is that veterans are likely to be familiar with firearms, and they often have easy access to lethal weapons. Especially in their transition after the return from war, many veterans do not feel comfortable unless they have a loaded weapon nearby. Another risk factor is substance abuse, especially alcohol, which is a depressant and releases inhibitions.

Statistics from past years suggest that there is an epidemic of suicides among veterans. While the Veteran's Administration reports that it does not track suicides among veterans, a survey of state veteran's departments by CBS News shows that at the minimum in 2005, 6,000 veterans killed themselves. The 120 per week rate is twice that of non-veterans. While denying the CBS News numbers, the Veteran's Administration head of mental health, Dr. Ira Katz, was found emailing to other VA staff that 1,000 veterans – just among those who were current patients of the VA – attempted suicide each month. Because of stigma, shame, some religious concerns and insurance issues, suicide tends to be under-reported, with many deaths attributed to “accidents” instead of intent. Current data indicate that at least three times as many Vietnam veterans have killed themselves after returning home as were killed in Vietnam.

Sadly, from the current conflicts, the suicide rate for veterans age 18 to 24 is four times the national average. Suicide rates for the general population increase with age, with elderly white men having the highest rate of suicide. Several reports have surfaced recently regarding death while sleeping of Iraq/Afghanistan veterans who were receiving medication for mental health problems. The news reports question whether their medications caused their deaths or whether those were suicides. See www.ptsdcombat.blogspot or wvgazette.com/News/200805230640.

Review the warning signs of suicide: If someone talks about wanting to hurt or kill themselves, take them seriously and ask some calm questions. You will not trigger suicide by asking about it. (Do not, however, push someone who suffers from PTSD to talk about their trauma experience before they are ready.) Signs include



talking or writing about death, dying or suicide; hopelessness; rage, uncontrolled anger, seeking revenge; acting in a reckless or risky way; feeling trapped, like there's no way out; saying or feeling there's no reason for living; and trying to access lethal means.

If you think the person might be suicidal, do not leave them alone. Say, “I'm going to get you some help.” Locally, 24/7, call Minnesota LinkVets at 1-888-LinkVet (546-5838) or take the veteran to the VA hospital where they will be seen immediately. Call the National Suicide Prevention Line at 1-800-273-TALK regarding loved ones at a distance.

For additional signs unique to veterans visit the synod Web site, click on “Healing the Wounds of War,” then on “Preventing Suicide.”

Resources for Veterans' Families

The Ministry with the Military of Calvary Lutheran in Golden Valley will continue to hold monthly presentations on the theme: “What a Family Needs to Know: Re-Integration Issues.” The July 16 meeting will feature David Thompson, retired Navy chaplain and military family life consultant for the Minnesota National Guard. This free presentation is from 7-8:30 p.m. with time for questions, discussion, dessert and networking.

Calvary is located at 7600 Golden Valley Road, just off of Highway 55 on Rhode Island Ave.

For individual conversations or more information, veterans can contact Jim Almquist at 763-522-8815 or jim@almquist.net or Skip Reeves at 763-231-2965 or sreeves@calvary.org.